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A BRAVE FRONTIERSMAN

BY

REVEREND HENRY COHEN,

Galveston, Texas.

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A BRAVE FRONTIERSMAN.

BY REVEREND HENRY COHEN, *Galveston, Texas.*

Major-General L. M. Openheimer, of the Texas Volunteer Guard, recently called my attention to an article entitled, "The Island of Death," by General James B. Fry, U. S. A., which appeared in *The Army and Navy Magazine*, of August 26, 1893. Reference therein is made to an anonymous "little Jew" who, from the account given, must have been among the bravest of that gallant fifty who, against terrible odds, and amidst gruesome surroundings, successfully quelled a most dangerous Indian outbreak. Believing that the name of such a hero, linked inseparably with the exploit, should go down to posterity, I was anxious to find out the name of the "little Jew." This anxiety was laid to rest by the information conveyed to me by Major-General Openheimer, that the full account of the battle appeared in *Harper's Monthly*, of June, 1895, contributed by General G. A. Forsyth, U. S. A., the gallant commander of the forces engaged in the fight. In this thrilling article, among the names of the fifty men who were in the engagement is that of S. Schlesinger, the only semblance to a Jewish name in the list, the writer prefacing the *dramatis personæ* with the following remark: "As of late years there has been some discussion as to who were the men who were with me in the fight on the Arickaree Fork of the Republican river, I herewith append the list as copied from the original roll. All but four of these men were native Americans, and a number of them college graduates, and I never saw but one company of enlisted men whom I thought exceeded them in general intelligence." *

* "A Frontier Fight," by General A. G. Forsyth, U. S. A., *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, June, 1895, page 43.

Feeling a keen interest in the matter, with especial reference to the "little Jew," I put myself in communication with General Forsyth, from whom I received the following:

" WILKESBARRE, PA., *December 27th*, 1897.

MY DEAR RABBI COHEN :

Pardon my delay in answering your inquiry of December 7th regarding Mr. Samuel Schlesinger, who served under my command in the Western frontier in 1868, and who was with me in my fight with the Sioux Indians in the Arickaree Fork. I was very busy when I got your letter, and it was put aside to answer, but in some way I allowed myself to forget it—not intentionally, I assure you, for I have a high admiration of the courage and splendid pluck and endurance of young Schlesinger on the occasion above mentioned. Schlesinger was a mere lad at the time, probably nineteen or twenty years of age. He had never been in action prior to our fight with the Indians, and throughout the whole engagement, which was one of the hardest, if not the very hardest ever fought on the Western plains, he behaved with great courage, cool persistence, and a dogged determination that won my unstinted admiration, as well as that of his comrades, many of whom had seen service throughout the War of the Rebellion on one side or the other. I can accord him no higher praise than that he was the equal in manly courage, steady and persistent devotion to duty, and unswerving and tenacious pluck, of any man in my command. It is a real pleasure for me to state this fact. When I wrote the account of my fight on the Arickaree Fork for publication, I took especial pains to commend some of my men, but the article was too long and was cut somewhat by the editor. I especially mentioned the pluck and endurance of this young son of Israel, and spoke of him as a worthy descendant of King David.

In the summer of 1895, a short time after I had written the account of my fight that appeared in *Harper's Monthly*, I was abroad, and while there I had a letter from Mr. Schlesinger, who is a merchant in Cleveland. I am looking forward to meeting him some day with great satisfaction. . . .

I am, sir, with sincere respect,

Very truly yours,

[Signed]

GEO. A. FORSYTH.

TO RABBI HENRY COHEN."

In a subsequent letter from the distinguished General (dated from Washington, D. C., March 11th, 1898) he again refers to Schlesinger as " brave, cool, and of sound sense."

The circumstance of the fight is better told in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (June, 1895), but the special features that characterize Schlesinger as a brave frontiersman are narrated in *The Army and Navy Magazine* (August 26th, 1893), from which I glean the following :

The pressure on the government during the War of the Rebellion deprived the Indian frontier of the military protection which it much needed and had previously received. The Indians, fully recognizing the advantages which our internal struggle gave them, became aggressive, exacting, and insulting. They preyed upon the settlers, stopped and robbed the overland stages, seized stock, took possession of station-houses, and, when hungry passengers were seated at their meals, turned them out, and themselves consumed all the scanty supply of provisions, and sometimes added murder to their other offenses. Seeing the weakness of our military posts, they insulted and taunted the garrisons, and occasionally robbed them.

But, notwithstanding this condition of things on the frontier the importance of connecting the Atlantic and Pacific by rail, enhanced by the Rebellion, was not forgotten. Encouraged by the inflation of the currency and its free circulation, and backed by the spirit of enterprise and daring which the war brought into the highest activity, the Union and Kansas Pacific railroads were pushed out into the Indian hunting grounds. This was a serious matter for the savages. Major General Hancock says, in an official report made in 1867: "The extension of our great lines of travel across the plains is driving away the buffalo, and thus interfering with the hunting grounds of the Indians and with their only means of support. The government makes no sufficient arrangements to support them where the game has disappeared, and they are obliged to roam over the country after the buffalo to support themselves."

With the game driven from his hunting grounds by the opening and constant use of our lines of travel, forbidden

by us to roam at large in pursuit of it, required to live upon certain reservations of land, with no other means of subsistence than those afforded by the government, and those wholly insufficient, and with strong convictions as to his rights and his ability to defend them, the Indian was not likely to be quiet.

In the winter of 1866 the situation was alarming to the settlers, and was rendered more critical by the divided responsibility of the Indian Bureau and the War Department. Military commanders were only able by the most judicious management to secure from the Indians partial observance of the inadequate treaties in force. Satanta, a Kiowa chief, told Major Douglas, commanding Fort Dodge, that the Sioux were coming down to make coalition against us in the spring, and that they intended to make war.

The Cheyennes, who fiercely opposed the construction of the railways, sought a council with General Palmer, commanding at Fort Ellsworth, Kansas, where the road now crosses the Smoky Hill river. Preparations were at once made for the reception of these barbaric lords, with their wild retainers. Two hospital tents were pitched, one for the council and the other to serve as quarters for the guests. A couple of fat steers were slaughtered, and coffee, sugar, and bread in abundance were provided ; for these dusky diplomats never talk on an empty stomach if they can avoid it.

They arrived at the appointed time—"Roman Nose," a great war leader ; "Black Kettle," principal chief, and "Big Head," a noted young brave—accompanied by their favorite wives and a few young bucks.

When the envoys had rested a day and gorged themselves with fresh beef, the officers of the garrison, in full dress, assembled with the chief at the council chamber. After the customary hand-shaking the whites arranged themselves across one side of the tent, facing the reds who completed the rectangle. For some minutes there was a quiet but diligent puffing at a single stone pipe, or calumet, which

was passed around from mouth to mouth, with a covert wipe of the stem from each pale face as it came to his turn.

The general welcomed the Indians in a few well-chosen words, and asked the object of their visit. Black Kettle, a fine looking man of middle age and heavy features and frame, arose. He possessed great influence with his tribe, and by his wise council had more than once averted war. His dress was simple, with the exception of a massive necklace of crescent-shaped silver plates, from the front of which hung a heavy silver medal bearing the profile, in relief, of Washington. It had been presented long before by the President of the United States to one of Black Kettle's ancestors, and was worn with evident pride.

This chief spoke at some length and to the point. It was the old story of honest, oppressed Indians, and treacherous, tyrannical white men. Much truth was told with native eloquence, and the Great Father was asked to stop the building of the iron road, which would soon drive away the buffalo and leave his children without food.

After the hearty grunt of approval by his followers had subsided, Roman Nose moved in a solemn and majestic manner to the center of the chamber.

As he warmed with his topic his great chest heaved and fire flashed from his eyes. His speech was brief, as became a soldier, and to the same effect as Black Kettle's. Unlike the latter, however, he said that never before had he taken the hand of the white man in friendship, but that he could be a strong friend as well as a bitter foe, and it was for the white chief and the Great Father to decide which part he should play in the future. As the sequel will show, this was probably the last, as well as the first, time he and the whites joined hands in friendship.

General Palmer assured the speakers that their words should be faithfully reported at Washington, but made them no promises.

Our war in the interior had now ended, and our troops

were quite ready to turn their attention to the frontier. Accordingly, Major General Hancock moved out in March 1867, with a force consisting of some fifteen hundred men, composed of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, with instructions from General Sherman not to hold the Indians to account for some murders which had been the subject of complaint, but "to make among the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches, a display of force; to notify them that if they wished for war they could have it; and to explain to them fully that hereafter they must keep off the route of travel—railroads and other roads; that all depredations, and molestation of travelers must cease forthwith, and that all threatening of our military posts by them, verbally or by message, or otherwise, must cease at once, or war would ensue."

The Indians were neither prepared nor disposed to accept this challenge as suddenly and as formally as it was offered. They evidently construed the movements as meaning immediate or prospective war; and, to gain time, they used diplomacy with skill worthy of a Beaconsfield or a Schouvaloff. Councils and talks without number and without significance or sincerity were held.

The state of affairs in the spring of 1867 is shown by General Hancock's official report of May 14th, in which he says: "It is my present intention to maintain active operations during the summer, and as late into the winter as practicable (unless peace be made meanwhile), against all Sioux and Cheyennes (save friendly bands of the former) who may be found between Arkansas and the Platte."

The instances of fortitude and bravery which occurred during the bloody struggle which now set in are almost "as numerous as grains of sand on the sea shore." One engagement furnished an exhibition of courage, skill and endurance unsurpassed, perhaps unequalled, in any age or clime.

General Hancock had been called to other duty, and

General Sheridan had succeeded him, being accompanied by Brevet Colonel George A. Forsyth, Major Ninth United States Cavalry, as acting inspector general. This officer, chafed by the restraint and inactivity of his staff position, begged of his chief a command in the field; but at that period, close on the heels of the great war and the army reduction which followed it, leaders were more abundant than followers, and all of the rank and file that could be brought into the field were under command of Sully, Custer, and other able and distinguished officers, and no opportunity for the assignment of Colonel Forsyth, according to his rank, presented itself. But as additional forces were much needed he was told that if quite willing to do so he might raise and lead a force of fifty men, not to be enlisted, but to be *hired* for the occasion at the rate of thirty-five dollars per month, each man to bring his own horse and equipments, receiving forty-five cents per day for the use thereof, but to be supplied with arms, ammunition and rations by the government.

The offer was promptly accepted and the men were soon found in the immediate vicinity of Fort Hays. Several of them were ex-soldiers who, having served out their enlistments long before, had adopted the life of the frontiersman, thus making the best possible material for the purpose in hand. The rest were the ordinary run of their kind, with two exceptions, the first being that of an American of far above the average stature, who appeared pre-eminent in knowledge of the Indians of the country, daring—in short, possessing all the qualities which constitute leadership upon such occasions. In the confidence he inspired he was a second Roderick Dhu. The other seemed to be inferior, and in all respects unfit for the service; a Jew, small, with narrow shoulders, sunken chest, quiet manner, and piping voice, but little knowledge of fire-arms or horsemanship; he was indeed unpromising as a son of Mars, and, after forty-nine had been obtained, was accepted only in order that he might be counted on the

rolls to make up the fifty and thus enable the expedition to start. Lieutenant Frederick H. Beecher, Third United States Infantry, at his urgent solicitation, was assigned as second in command. He was one of the marvelous products of our Civil War. Active, intelligent, and distinguished during that long contest, when he came out of it he had lost the use of one leg, yet insisted upon serving on the active, instead of the retired list. The embodiment of energy and bravery, rest and fear were words without meaning to him. A noted guide and good rifle shot was dubbed acting lieutenant, and one of the men, being a doctor, acted as surgeon for the party.

Thus organized, each man including the officers, armed with a Spencer carbine, and a revolver, and supplied with one hundred and twenty rounds of ammunition, partly carried on four pack mules, and seven days rations (consisting principally of bread and salt), in each man's haversack, the command took the field.

After scouting for some days, a message was received at Fort Wallace from the Governor of Colorado, saying that the settlers between Bison Basin and Harbinger Lake were hard pressed by an overwhelming force of Indians, and begging that Colonel Forsyth would march promptly to their defense. No orders nor formalities were awaited. The command turned at once in the direction indicated. Other depredations by the same Indians were soon discovered, and their trail was struck and rapidly followed. It led to the headwaters of Beaver Creek and thence up to the Arickaree fork of the Republican river. The repeated efforts of the Indians to mislead their pursuers by dispersing in various directions from time to time, were unsuccessful, and on the 14th of September, 1867,* the large, fresh trail of a reassembled force was struck and pursued hotly until the

* General Forsyth gives the year as 1868. *Harper's Monthly*, June, 1895, "A Frontier Fight," pages 42-62, and private correspondence as above.

afternoon of the 16th. At that time, although not an Indian had been seen, the observant and experienced followers knew that a fight must inevitably take place next day. As the command had no provisions left except biscuit for one day, and no time to hunt game, it was desirable to bring on and end the combat at the earliest possible moment. Instead, therefore, of marching as usual until night, the commander, finding a good grazing spot, resolved to go into camp about five o'clock that afternoon, to give his animals rest and grass and get fully prepared for the events of the morrow.

It was well that he halted. The Indians had a cunning ambuscade laid for him near by, thinking he would march until dusk and fall into it just at the end of a hard day's journey. The bivouac was established on the bank of the Arickaree, in which stream there were but a few inches of running water. The surrounding country was an open but undulating plain, with hills and ridges a mile or two away, and a few scrubby wild plum trees here and there in low places. A sand island in the middle of the stream, directly behind the bivouac, was fringed with willows, and bore a few stunted trees.

The horses were carefully picketed, a guard posted, and the men lay down near their horses, with their weapons in their hands. The commander was up before daylight and on the lookout, while others yet slept. Peering steadfastly into the surrounding gloom he saw, before there was hardly a tinge of light, the stealthy movement of the approaching foe. He instantly called to his men to hold on to their horses and prepare for attack. The call was not a moment too soon. The Indians rushed in, shaking buffalo robes and blankets, yelling and whooping, for the purpose of stampeding and running off the animals. This was the first move in their plan of attack. It failed, and a few rounds drove them back.

But as day dawned their overwhelming numbers and their preparations for a general advance became visible. Colonel Forsyth instantly decided to take position on the sand island

behind him. It was oval in shape, some forty feet wide and two hundred feet long, and was separated from the mainland by a mere thread of water. The well directed fire of three chosen marksmen posted in the grass kept the Indian skirmishers at bay while the movement of men and animals to the island was effected. The animals were tied securely to bushes, and the men were distributed in a circle and ordered to lie down, and as soon as possible dig rifle pits for themselves in the sand. The only intrenching tools were pocket knives and hands; but the fire of the enemy hastened the work, and in a few minutes the only man in sight was the commander, who still walked erect from point to point, instructing and encouraging the men. He went under cover only when one of the men, having completed his own shelter, prepared a pit for his chief.

An annoying and desultory fire was kept up by the Indians until about nine o'clock, when preparations for a grand assault became visible. Large numbers of dismounted warriors, armed with Spencer, Sharp or Henry rifles (as all of the braves were), and many boys with bows and arrows were seen crawling through the grass and getting their position in easy range of the island. Further away on the open plain the mounted storming party formed for the charge. The dismounted men opened a terrific fire upon the island and the boys clouded the air with arrows.

The plan of the foe was promptly and fully comprehended by Colonel Forsyth. Gallant and destructive as the fire from the grass was, he would not permit his men to answer it, but held every gun in readiness to open, at the word, upon the charging party, which he knew would soon rush on to ride over and slaughter them. The fire slackened; women and children lining the hills, just out of range, began their unearthly yells and wild dances, and three hundred mounted warriors, painted and stripped, with the "dog soldiers"—desperadoes from various tribes—in front, all led by a grand chief whose waist was girdled by a

crimson sash, charged at full speed, in solid column and with deafening war whoops, upon the devoted and determined little band of heroes. Not a shot was fired by our men until the confident and exulting savages were within thirty yards of the rifle pits. Then at the word of command the Island of Death opened, and before its unerring aim and rapid volleys the front of the assaulting column halted and fell as if it had pitched headlong against an impenetrable wall. The rear spread away to the right and left and sought safety in flight.

The savages were evidently dismayed and disheartened at their sudden and crushing repulse. The ground was strewn with dead and dying warriors. Several bodies were within a few yards of the breastworks. Nearest, lay the superb but lifeless form of Roman Nose, the red tide from his hot veins saturating the crimson sash which encircled his naked body. During the siege the Indians resorted to daring by day and to cunning by night to remove these bodies, but without success. The loss of the war chief's life and body was a fatal blow. The firing almost ceased, and it was not until two o'clock in the afternoon that another assault was attempted. It was prepared, conducted, received, and repulsed, quite like the first one. A third, similar in all respects, took place about four in the afternoon, but this effort was much feebler than the two which preceded it, and the gallant little band felt that it must prepare for a siege, but need not fear another assault.

A September rain began, and at last the long and bloody day drew to a close and night threw a thick, wet mantle over besiegers and besieged. Not until then did the latter find time to look calmly and deliberately upon the desperate situation. Every horse and mule was killed by the enemy's fire early in the action. As the last one went down an Indian called out in audible and unbroken English: "There goes the last d——d horse down." Lieutenant Beecher, shot through the side, had died in great agony before dark.

Three men, including the doctor, lay dead in the trenches ; two others were mortally, and seventeen more, among them Colonel Forsyth, severely wounded. Before ten o'clock Forsyth had been shot in the right thigh, the bullet lodging near the skin on the inner side. A few hours afterwards a ball entered his left leg below the knee, completely shattering the bone, and before night, as he was lifted up to look over the breastwork, a third bullet grazed the top of his head, making a painful scalp wound and chipping out a small piece of the skull.

The peril and location of the party were wholly unknown to their friends. Fort Wallace, the nearest point from which succor could be expected, was nearly a hundred miles away. Without provisions and surrounded by more than nine hundred well armed, well mounted, fierce and confident warriors, the situation was one to appall the stoutest heart. But these heroes were not daunted. The intrepid commander, forgetting his three painful wounds, from one of which he had himself cut out the ball, briefly summed up the case : " No shot," said he, " has been wasted. We have plenty of ammunition, abundance of horse and mule meat and can get water by a little digging through the sand. We will yet win the fight or sell our lives dearly in the attempt. Let a well be sunk, connect the rifle pits by a continuous parapet, and strengthen the lines with saddles, and, as far as possible, with the bodies of the dead horses. Bring in the saddle blankets for the comfort of the wounded, and cut the horse and mule flesh into strips for food. Let two men, who are willing to risk their lives, take my rough map of the country and pocket compass, and try to-night to steal through the enemy's lines and make their way to Fort Wallace. When this is all done," he continued, " and the wounded are cared for in a secure place to be dug out for the purpose, you can rest in peace until morning, for these Indians never venture upon a night attack."

The instructions were cheerfully and promptly carried out. The two scouts left the island about midnight. To escape pursuit in case they got out, they went in their stocking feet, walking backwards, so that if the enemy discovered the tracks in the morning they might think they were made by Indians in moccasins going towards the island, and not by the white men leaving it.

By dawn the heroic garrison was ready for the day's business. The scouts had not been driven back, but there was a painful doubt as to whether they had passed the enemy's line or lost their lives in the attempt. All day a steady but not destructive fire was kept up by the Indians, and was answered, whenever it could be done, with effect. There was no disposition to renew the desperate charges of the day before. The Indians, exasperated by the coolness and courage of the whites and the deliberate, galling fire which they kept up, sought fruitlessly, by flags of truce, pretended withdrawals, and other devices to draw them from their intrenchments. Challenges and insults in the grossest language were offered, but nothing disturbed for a moment the caution, vigilance, and coolness of the garrison.

So the day wore on and when night came, with only raw mule meat for supper, the wounded and weary sank to rest. Before morning two more men started out to pass the lines and try to bring succor. They were, however, unable to get through, and returned. The third day passed as the second, but the two men who started out on the third night did not return. The fourth day passed as the two preceding ones. No more scouts were sent out. The meat now began to get putrid, and it was sprinkled with gunpowder, in the hope that the saltpeter in the powder would aid in preserving the meat or make it a little less unpalatable. But before the day was over it could no longer be eaten, and the pangs of extreme hunger began. A wolf that ventured too near the lines at night was killed by a lucky shot, and served to appease for a short time the cravings of a few, but by the

fifth day the suffering from hunger was intense. Then for the first time a small fire was made of such sticks as could be gathered together, and by charring the putrid meat they were able to use it a little longer.

On the fifth day the Indians began to disappear, and some of the men ventured out to gather some wild plums near by. The plums, and a jar of pickles, which was found on the first camp-ground, aided to sustain life. By the seventh day the Indians had entirely disappeared, but the beleaguered force was now too weak to move. With no word from their scouts, and starvation staring them in the face, there was, with one exception, no despondency or complaint. On the eighth day some of the men became delirious, and the wounded were in a dreadful condition. The shattered bone of Colonel Forsyth's leg stuck through the skin, and maggots had taken possession of the horrible sore. The eighth night wore away with troubled dreams of rich feasts and wild awakenings to actual famine. The time seemed near when neither feasts nor famine could be helpful or hurtful. Pain had almost passed away, when, on the morning of the ninth day men came in sight. Succor had arrived at last, but the poor sufferers were too far gone to cheer or even rejoice. Perhaps they felt instinctively that the road to relief was shorter and smoother by way of death than by a return to life.

The shrewd and plucky scouts who left on the first night, reached Fort Wallace on the third day thereafter, and those who got out on the third night happened to fall in with a scouting party of troops. Relief, which came with all haste from both sources, reached the fatal island at the same hour. The stench from this contracted battle field was so horrible that strong men could hardly endure it long enough to remove the living and bury the dead.

Let us not dwell upon the painful journey to the fort, the dangerous surgical operations, and the tedious recovery of the wounded. The remnants of the party which had left the

post but a few days before, full in numbers and vigor, for the noble purposes of defending helpless women and children against the merciless savages, returned to it with thinned ranks and mutilated and fainting bodies, but their high purpose had been accomplished. Their victory was complete. They had triumphed over every weakness of body and spirit as well as over a most desperate foe. If there is a lesson in the memory of great deeds it should be found here. But, alas! the bright chapter which they added to their country's glory at such a heavy cost has been passed over almost unnoted. The empty honor of a "brevet" is the only recognition Colonel Forsyth received for his heroic conduct in this affair. Can bravery, gallantry and devotion to duty, flourish under a military system in which such services are neither rewarded nor remembered?

It is due to truth and justice to state that in this remarkable party of fifty there were but forty-nine heroes. The large, knowing, and confident man on whom special reliance was placed in the beginning, utterly failed in the hour of trial. Quickly making a rifle pit for himself, no arguments, threats nor persuasion could induce him to rise from it, or fire a shot while the enemy was in sight. He insisted that they always kept a "bead drawn on him," and that the least exposure would be certain death. But the loss of this man's services was fully made up by the bravery, skill, and untiring activity of the despised "little Jew." There was no sphere of gallantry or usefulness in which he was not conspicuous.

* "When the foe charged on the breastworks,
With the madness of despair,
And the bravest souls were tested,
The little Jew was there.

* "The Island of Death," by General James B. Fry, U. S. A.,
Army and Navy Magazine, August 26, 1893. Pages 3-11.

“ When the weary dozed on duty,
Or the wounded needed care,
When another shot was called for,
The little Jew was there.

“ With the festering dead around them,
Shedding poison in the air,
When the crippled chieftain ordered,
The little Jew was there.”



1. S. N. Adler, The Inquisition in Peru
2. M. J. Koller, The German-Jewish Migration to America
3. L. Hühner, Asser Levy
4. L. Hühner, Whence came the first Jewish settlers to New York
5. " " , Francis Salvador
6. H. Cohen, A brave frontiersman
7. S. C. Adler, Trial of Jorge de Almeida



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